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AUTHOR Ryan, William; And Others
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ABSTRACT

It was hypothesized that fundamental belief systems contribute to the development of political attitudes and opinions above and beyond adherence to so-called "liberalism" or "conservatism." A 20-item instrument was developed and administered to 63 college males and females to assess their underlying fundamental assumptions, overt adherence to meritocratic or antimeritocratic principles, and specific opinions on a number of public and social issues. There was a significant correlation between students' basic beliefs or ideologies and their adherence to meritocratic or antimeritocratic principles. The correlation between basic beliefs and political orientation was less strong, but still significant. There was no relationship between self-designated political orientation and the overall index of fundamental beliefs. Overall, the results indicated that how people think about human nature and human behavior may provide significant information about what types of social policies and programs they would like to see implemented. (RM)

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ASSESSING IDEOLOGY: THE INFLUENCE OF FUNDAMENTAL BELIEF SYSTEMS ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL OPINIONS

by
William Ryan, M. Brinton Lykes, Barbara Bertner
Boston College

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Assessing ideology: The influence of fundamental belief systems on social and political opinions

William Ryan, M.Brinton Lykes, Barbara Bertner

Boston College

Terms like "liberalism" and "conservatism" seem today to be increasingly inadequate as predictors of opinions on political issues and public policy choices. This is evident both in the work of those who study social and political attitudes and in the language of those who practice in the political arena. For example, in political speeches and writing we find the introduction of new words like neoliberal, and neoconservative and the revival of old words like populist and progressive. We find scholars making finer and finer distinctions between different dimensions of liberalism and conservatism - economic, social, political, and so forth (see, for example, Comrey & Newmeyer, 1965). It seems increasingly clear that it is time to move beyond the liberal-conservative dimension (see Glock, 1964).

In this paper, an effort is made to introduce a more basic concept that will add to and expand the explanatory power of liberalism-conservatism. This concept is rooted in the work of those who have sought to conceptualize and measure deeper and probably more stable psychological factors, a tradition that goes back to Marx and Mannheim (1936) and includes the investigation of topics variously

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labelled ideology, belief systems, values, world-views and so forth (see, for example, Gouldner, 1970; Perloe, 1967; Rokeach, 1968; Wrightsman, 1964; Zeitz & Lincoln, 1981).

In his recent book Equality one of the authors focused on the importance of one's general ideological position - that is, one's fundamental assumptions and beliefs about human nature and behavior. The research described here attempts to test two related hypotheses derived from this idea. The first, hypothesizes a relationship between one's fundamental assumptions about human nature and one's adherence to two contrasting viewpoints on equality - a competitive, "equal opportunity" definition or a definition putting greater emphasis on equal access to resources. The second hypothesis proposes that these same fundamental assumptions are related to one's more specific positions on public and social policies.

Before describing the design and results of the research, let me elaborate briefly on the three terms of the proposition:

-first, one's fundamental belief system

-second, one's position on the issue of equality, and,

-third, one's specific position on concrete policy proposals.

Taking the three in reverse order, the question of policy opinions is perhaps most familiar in the literature of political surveys. National opinion surveys have asked questions such as, are you in favor of national health insurance ? or do you support affirmative action programs ? You are all familiar with these approaches to specific political opinions.

The second term - one's interpretation of the idea of equality - might be elicited by asking a person to explain what Thomas Jefferson meant when he asserted that "all men are created equal". Putting aside for a moment a discussion of who is included or excluded by Jefferson in his use of the exclusive term men, there are, broadly speaking, two types of answers to this question. The first, which is the most common in American society, emphasizes the creation of conditions of "equal opportunity" for everyone to engage fairly in an individualistic competition for achievement and resources. Our shorthand name for this is the meritocratic or fair play position. The other, less common, interpretation of equality emphasizes cooperation, sharing and more equal access to and distribution of resources. We term this the antimeritocratic or fair shares position.

Finally, in speaking about fundamental belief systems we are focusing on more or less "unconscious" assumptions about three particularly relevant aspects of human nature and behavior. They are:

1) whether in attempting to organize one's

understanding of human beings one puts relatively greater emphasis on the role of the individual or on that of some larger collectivity;

2) whether one tends to put greater emphasis on differences or on similarities between persons; and,

3) whether one tends to give greater weight to internal versus external determinants of behavior.

The central question being addressed - to repeat - is whether what we have called these fundamental belief systems contribute to the development of political attitudes and opinions above and beyond adherence to so-called "liberalism" or "conservatism".

Method

To develop a 20-item instrument to measure ideology or fundamental assumptions we tried to construct items that were not readily identifiable as to their purpose. The 20-items making up the index of basic beliefs are on Table 1. For example, statement 12, "A small army of brave men can often defeat a much larger army of cowards" is intended to tap assumptions about the internal versus external determinants of behavior. In contrast, statement 16, "After I meet them once or twice I usually have no trouble at all telling one identical twin from another" seeks to elicit assumptions about similarities and differences. Item 6, "A great symphony orchestra differs from a mediocre one largely because of the skillful leadership of the conductor" is

aimed at assessing the relative importance one places on the individual or on the collectivity in assessing human behavior.

In addition, five items were constructed to identify whether subjects tended to adhere to meritocratic-fair play or antimeritocratic-fair share principles. An example of one of these items is "A society can be both just and efficient only if the most capable individuals are in important positions of social, economic, and political leadership."

Finally, eight statements were presented, similar to those found in political opinion surveys, to identify students' opinion on a range of current or proposed policies on various social issues, for example, "The government should guarantee that every person who wants to work should be able to get a decent job."

A questionnaire was administered to 61 college males and females to assess:

1)underlying fundamental assumptions;

2)overt adherence to meritocratic or antimeritocratic principles; and,

3)specific opinions on a number of public and social policy issues. Subjects were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement to all 33 items, using a 7-point Likert-type format and to indicate their own political position, that is, liberal, moderate, or

conservative.

Results

Results of correlational analyses supported the two major hypotheses. More specifically,

1. the index of one's fundamental or basic beliefs, one's ideology, was significantly correlated with one's adherence to meritocratic or antimeritocratic principles, as measured by the mean score on these items, ($r=.36$, $p=.002$);

2. the correlation between the index of fundamental assumptions and subject's mean score on the eight policy items was .36 ($p=.003$). The correlation between this mean and political orientation was less strong ($r=.26$), but still significant ($p=.03$).

Additional analyses revealed that there was no relationship between self-designated political orientation and the overall index of fundamental beliefs ($r=.09$, n.s.). Supporting our argument that the index of basic assumptions is not tapping a factor which is a variation on liberalism-conservatism.

To examine the relative contributions of the two variables they were entered into a step-wise multiple regression; the multiple r was .45, with the index of basic assumptions accounting for approximately twice as much variance as political orientation, suggesting that this index may be, in general, a more powerful predictor of

policy opinions than the traditional liberal-conservative dimension. However, on each of the 8 items this pattern varied; a couple were correlated most closely with ideology, and others with political orientation. Still others were influenced by both of these factors, as can be seen by briefly examining Table 2.

This policy item asked students to agree or disagree with whether or not labor unions had too much power, with disagreement indicating that they did not think unions had too much power. Both political orientation and the index of basic beliefs or ideology showed indeperdent effects such that those who are liberal are more likely than those who are conservative to think that unions do not have too much power; secondly, those whose ideology reflects a belief in similarities, external factors, and the collectivity are also less likely to think that unions have too much power. These varying patterns suggest lines of further investigation.

Discussion

The findings support the hypotheses - which is probably true of 90 % of the papers being presented at the conference. What might this mean ?

First it raises the issue that how one thinks about human nature and human behavior may provide us with significant information about what types of social policies and programs one would like to see implemented. A tendency

to think of people as fundamentally more similar than different, as inextricably linked to each other (in some form of collectivity) and as more shaped by their social context or external forces suggests that one will position oneself on the side of social programs and policies which embody an egalitarian position, ones which urge that all get a fair share of the resources and benefits of society. That these assumptions have not received considerable attention in studies of political opinions or in the language of politicians and policy makers may be more reflective of the subtle masking of the meritocratic-fair play ideology by the language of the liberal politician. The reemergence of a strong "conservative" element in the center of the political and governmental life of the 1980s has perhaps fostered a second look at the presumed differences between so-called "liberals" and "conservatives". A second look at seeming inconsistencies in political priorities among working class union members and upper middle class professionals may be more readily explained by identifying this underlying assumption or belief along the three dimensions presented here. This research represents a first step in developing a measure of these basic beliefs and in clarifying its relationship to the more traditional measure of liberalism-conservatism. Our ability to put forward more egalitarian social policies on the political agenda of the future may rest in part on our ability to separate out the advocates of meritocracy who support it at the expense of the community from those who truly believe in fair share

equality but who have been heretofore dismissed because they did not "appear liberal".

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TABLE 1

ITEMS COMPRISING THE INDEX OF BASIC BELIEFS

1. No matter how much of our lives are lived in groups we are first and foremost individuals.

2. Even though each individual has his or her own particular problems and advantages, in the larger sense we're all in the same boat.

4. Most people who have nervous breakdowns do so because society pushes them too hard, not because they are weak.

5. There's a great deal of wisdom in Rudyard Kipling's line, "The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under the skin".

6. A great symphony orchestra differs from a mediocre one largely because of the skillful leadership of the conductor.

7. When someone is courageous I am most likely to assume that he or she "possesses courage," that is, that being courageous belongs to (is a part of) him or her.

8. Most persons are motivated by a few dominant impulses that determine most of their behavior.

9. Even though each person has his or her own personal characteristics, in the overall human beings are more alike than they are different.

10. In my experience, when a project or activity is really successful, it is usually due to the efforts of one person.

11. Not only is it true that two heads are better than one but six heads are even better than two.

12. A small army of brave men can often defeat a much larger army of cowards.

13. If everyone had an IQ higher than 120, no one would be considered stupid.

14. There is a lot of wisdom in the old Dutch proverb "If each before his (or her) own stoop sweeps the village will be clean".

15. The stresses and strains of life might often break down those persons who are weak, but they can also further strengthen those persons who are strong.

16. After I meet them once or twice, I usually have no trouble at all in telling one identical twin from the other.

17. If you think about life you realize that each person is a separate individual leading his or her own individual life.

18. No matter what a person might seem to be like, it usually turns out that what he or she actually does depends mostly on the particular situation he or she is in.

19. Even when they're in almost idenntical situations, different persons tend to act in very different ways.

20. In most situations the proverb "Many hands make light labor" is more accurate than the proverb "Too many cooks spoil the broth".

TABLE 2

INTERACTION OF POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND IDEOLOGY

IN RELATION TO POLICY CHOICE

POLICY ITEM: LABOR UNIONS HAVE TOO MUCH POWER[1]

N=58 Political Orientation / Ideology[2]	CONSERVATIVE	MODERATE	LIBERAL	TOTAL
LOW	$^{0}/_{4}$	$^{4}/_{10}$	$^{1}/_{4}$	$^{5}/_{18}$ (28%)
MIDDLE	$^{0}/_{2}$	$^{7}/_{14}$	$^{3}/_{4}$	$^{10}/_{20}$ (50%)
HIGH	$^{4}/_{6}$	$^{4}/_{9}$	$^{4}/_{5}$	$^{12}/_{20}$ (60%)
TOTAL	$^{4}/_{12}$ (33%)	$^{15}/_{33}$ (45%)	$^{8}/_{13}$ (69%)	

1. Cell entries show proportion of those responding who <u>disagree</u>.

2. Low scores indicate that the person favors individual, internal, difference; High scores indicate that the person favors collective, external, similarity.